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ABSTRACT

Civic education is essential for sustaining constitutional democracy in the United States, a country with the world's oldest constitutional democracy with political institutions whose philosophical foundations serve as a model for aspiring peoples around the world. This task force paper involves a nation-wide discussion of civic education, what its principal goals should be, and how civic education can be revitalized. The paper answers the following questions: "What is civic education and what should its principal goals be?"; "What evidence is there of the need to improve civic education?"; "What is the relationship of civic education and character education?"; What are the characteristics of successful programs in civic education?"; and "How can civic education be revitalized?" (Contains 25 references.) (CB)

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# Task Force Paper

ED 403 203

## THE ROLE OF CIVIC EDUCATION

Prepared for

THE COMMUNITARIAN NETWORK

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By

The Task Force on Civic Education

Charles Quigley, Chair

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## INTRODUCTION

Americans should realize and take confidence from the fact that they live in the world's oldest constitutional democracy and that the philosophical foundations underlying their political institutions serve as a model for aspiring peoples around the world. That the "shot heard 'round the world" two centuries ago at the opening of the American Revolution continues to resound today should remind Americans that free institutions are among humanity's highest achievements and worthy of their full energies and earnest devotion to preserve.

Americans also should realize that civic education is essential to sustain our constitutional democracy. The habits of the mind, as well as what Alexis de Tocqueville called the "habits of the heart," the dispositions that inform the democratic ethos, are not inherited. They must be fostered and nurtured by word and study and by the power of example. Democracy is not a "machine that would go of itself," but must be consciously reproduced, one generation instructing the next in the knowledge and skills, as well as in the civic character and commitments required for its sustenance.

Special attention should be given to the role that parents, the media, and private associations play in helping children develop into informed and effective citizens who understand and appreciate the fundamental values and principles of American democracy. The schools, however, bear a special and historic responsibility for the development of competent and responsible citizens. Schools, therefore, should give sustained and systematic attention to civic education from kindergarten through high school.

This paper invites concerned citizens to join in a nation-wide discussion of civic education, what its principal goals should be, and how civic education can be revitalized.

## I. WHAT IS CIVIC EDUCATION AND WHAT SHOULD ITS PRINCIPAL GOALS BE?

Civic education in a democracy is preparation for sustaining and enhancing self-government. Democratic self-government means citizen participation based on informed, critical reflection.

In a constitutional democracy, effective civic education is a necessity because "the competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability to think critically and act deliberately in a pluralistic world, the empathy that permit us to hear and thus accommodate others, all involve skills that must be acquired" (Benjamin Barber [1992]).

The goal of civic education is competent and responsible participation in local, state, and national civic and political life. Such participation requires (1) the acquisition of a body of knowledge and understandings, (2) the development of intellectual and participatory skills, (3) the development of certain dispositions or traits of character, and (4) a reasoned commitment to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy.

**Citizens need to know and understand such central topics as the:**

- nature of civic life, politics, and government, and why politics and government are necessary; the purposes of government; the essential characteristics of limited and unlimited government; the nature and purposes of constitutions, and the alternative ways of organizing constitutional governments.

- historical, philosophical, and economic foundations of the American political system; the distinctive characteristics of American society and political culture; and the values and principles basic to American constitutional democracy, such as individual rights and responsibilities, concern for the public good, the rule of law, justice, equality, diversity, truth, patriotism, federalism and the separation of powers.

- embodiment of the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy in the U.S. Constitution, and in the 50 state constitutions, including how power and responsibility are distributed, shared, and limited; how national, state, and local governments are organized and what they do; the place of law in the American political system; and how the American political system provides for choice and opportunities for participation.

- relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs; how the world is organized politically and what the reciprocal influences are between the United States and the other nations of the world; and the functions of major international organizations.

- roles of the citizen in American democracy, including an understanding of what citizenship is; what the rights and responsibilities of citizens are; what civic dispositions or traits of public and private character are important to the preservation and improvement of American democracy; and the capacity to make reasoned decisions regarding when, how, and to what degree one should participate in civic affairs.

**Citizens need to develop the intellectual and participatory skills which are required for competent and responsible participation.**

- **Intellectual skills** in civics and government are inseparable from content. To be able to think critically about a political issue, for example, one must have an understanding of the issue, its history, its contemporary relevance, as well as command of a set of intellectual tools or considerations useful in dealing with such an issue. Thus equipped, the citizen is better able to evaluate, take, and defend positions on issues.

- **Participatory skills** in civics and government are those required (1) to monitor the political process and local, state, and national government; and (2) to influence politics and government.

**Citizens need to develop certain public and private dispositions or traits of character which enhance individual competence and promote the healthy functioning and maintenance of constitutional democracy.**

- Public traits of character conducive to thoughtful participation and essential to the healthy functioning of our political system include civility, respect for law, civic mindedness, critical mindedness, persistence, and a willingness to negotiate and compromise when conscience permits.

- Private traits of character essential to the well-being of our society include self-discipline, moral responsibility, honesty, and respect for individual worth and human dignity, and empathy for others.

**Citizens need to develop a reasoned commitment to those fundamental values and principles necessary for the preservation and improvement of American constitutional democracy.** In a free society citizens as individuals decide when to participate and when not and what commitments they wish to make.

Civic education must distinguish between education and indoctrination. Civic education enables citizens to make wise choices in full awareness of alternatives and provides the kind of experiences and understanding that foster the development of a reasoned commitment to those values and principles that enable a free society to exist. Thus, the individual citizen of a constitutional democracy is free to accept or decline democracy's standing offer to participate in self-government.

- **Why is civic education in the schools important for the nation?** The idea that American schools have a distinctively *civic* mission has been recognized since the earliest days of the Republic. Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and others realized that the establishment of well-constructed political institutions was not in itself a sufficiently strong foundation to maintain constitutional democracy. They knew that ultimately a free society must depend on its citizens—on their knowledge and skills and their moral and civic virtues. They believed that the civic mission of the schools is to foster the qualities of mind and heart required for successful government within a constitutional democracy.

- **Why are the formal and informal curricula important for effective civic education?** Although schools cannot assume total responsibility for civic education, they can and should provide effective civic education through both formal and informal civic curricula from the earliest grades to high school graduation.

  - **The formal curriculum:**

    - Formal instruction in civics and government should provide students with a basic understanding of civic life, politics, and government. It should help them understand the workings of their own and other political systems, as well as the relationship of American politics and government to world affairs. Formal instruction should provide a basis for understanding the rights and responsibilities of citizens and a framework for competent and responsible participation.

    - The formal curriculum should be augmented by learning experiences in both school and community that enable students to reach decisions about participation in their own governance and to determine how to take an active and constructive role in the betterment of the civic life of their schools, communities, and nation..

  - **The "informal curriculum":**

    - The "informal curriculum" refers to the governance of the school community and the relationships among those within it. These relationships should be models of basic civic values such as civility and respect for human dignity. They also should embody fundamental constitutional principles, such as adherence to due process of law.

    - Students should be held accountable for behaving in accordance with fair and reasonable standards and for respecting the rights and dignity of others, including their peers.

    - Classrooms and schools should be managed by adults who lead and govern in accordance with constitutional values and principles and who display traits of character worth emulating.

## II. WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE OF THE NEED TO IMPROVE CIVIC EDUCATION?

Despite the fact that there is general—indeed, almost universal—agreement that education for citizenship is essential in a constitutional democracy, there are disquieting reports about the extent and effectiveness of civic education in the United States. Unfortunately, sustained and systematic attention to the study of civics and government is neglected in too many American schools. Every educator knows and international assessments demonstrate that "students tend to learn what they *have* studied and that they cannot learn what they *have not* studied" (Diane Ravitch, 1995). If students do not have sufficient opportunities to study civics and government as they progress from kindergarten through grade twelve, the potential for promoting competent and responsible citizenship and for reducing the prevailing alienation from public life cannot be realized.

- **Challenges and strengths of American democracy.** Philosophers and social critics warn that American democracy faces some daunting challenges, although they also point to the enduring strengths of American democracy.
  - There are "warning signs of exhaustion, cynicism, opportunism, and despair" in the practice of democracy in contemporary America. (Jean Bethke Elshtain, 1995.)
  - Group "Balkanization," the splitting of people into strictly defined ethnic enclaves, impairs the idea of an American unity within the nation's diversity.
  - Americans live in the world's oldest constitutional democracy, and they still believe that democracy is the worthiest form of human government yet conceived.
  - The vision of a common life in liberty, justice and equality as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution continues to serve as a model for peoples around the world.
- **Neglect of civic education.**
  - Inattention to civic education stems in part from the false assumption that the body of knowledge and skills citizens need emerges as a by-product of the study of other subjects, or as an outcome of the process of schooling itself.
  - What K-12 students learn about civics and government and their support for democratic principles and participation in civil society are not well correlated.
  - The 1990 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) *Report Card in Civics* revealed that students have only a superficial knowledge of civics and lack depth of understanding. For example, only 38% of 8th graders knew that Congress makes laws; and nearly half of high school seniors did not recognize typical examples of the federal system of checks and balances.
  - The same NAEP *Report Card* also showed that although some students made gains in civics proficiency across the twelve year period separating the 1976 and 1988 assessments, most did not. At age 17, the performance of students attending schools in each of the types of communities studied—advantaged and disadvantaged, urban and

other—declined significantly. There were significant gaps in the performance of most students.

- Although half of the high school seniors tested displayed a detailed knowledge of major government structures and their functions, only six percent demonstrated a more developed understanding of a wide range of political institutions and processes.

- Particularly disturbing were the disparities among subpopulations. Eighth and twelfth grade males were more likely than their female peers to reach the highest levels of civic proficiency as defined by NAEP. The percentages of Black and Hispanic students who reached the uppermost levels of proficiency were far smaller than the percentage of White students who did.

- Teachers often are inadequately prepared in civic education.

- Assessment of civic education is inadequate in terms of both content and frequency.

  - Many states and districts mandate testing programs in mathematics, reading and language arts for elementary grades. Seldom is civic education included in these mandates. Consequently, teachers spend considerably more time working with students on math and reading than on other subjects such as civics. This situation is regrettable, because education for citizenship should start in the earliest years and continue into adulthood.

  - When assessments in civic education do occur, they are primarily in secondary schools and generally take the form of multiple choice tests. Such tests require students to select the correct answers from a number of possibilities and are useful for determining students' knowledge and understanding of basic facts and concepts. However, they fail to assess students' acquisition of a variety of civic skills such as evaluating, taking, and defending positions on political and civic issues, speaking and writing on these issues, and monitoring and influencing public policy.

- **Alienation from political life**. Empirical data show that a large segment of the population, including youth, is ill-informed about and disaffected from politics and government. Given the inadequacies of civic education, these findings are hardly surprising.

  - In 1994 an appraisal of 238,000 college freshmen across the country by the UCLA Higher Education Institute revealed that the percentage of college freshmen who say paying close attention to political affairs is important has declined to just 16%, its lowest level in 29 years.

  - In 1994, a *New York Times* (NYT) poll found that Americans are "profoundly alienated" from their elected representatives and pessimistic about both the short and long term future of the United States.

  - An American Bar Association Bill of Rights Survey (1991) revealed that only about one-third of American adults are aware that the Bill of Rights is the first ten amendments of the Constitution, and many of those polled did not support the Bill of Rights.

- Harris polls conducted from 1966 to 1993 show that public confidence in the Executive Branch and Congress dropped from 41% and 42% respectively in 1966 to 15% and 12% respectively in 1993.

- **Decline in civil society.** Empirical data suggest that the institutions of civil society, recognized from the time of Alexis de Tocqueville as a traditional strength and essential factor in the health of American society, may be waning. Robert Putnam of Harvard University argues that certain associations such as Boy Scouts, Parent-Teacher Associations, the Red Cross, and church-related groups, attract less participation than previously. If this trend continues, Putnam predicts, the United States in the next century will be no more than a "middling" nation with respect to civil society participation.

## III. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF CIVIC EDUCATION AND CHARACTER EDUCATION?

- **How are civic education and character education related?** Civic education and character education, though not synonymous, are related. Fostering public character and certain aspects of private character are essential elements of civic education. Good public character can hardly exist in the absence of good private character traits such as honesty and civility. The aims of civic and character education, therefore, overlap in important respects.

- **What distinguishes civic education from character education?**

  - Civic education is distinguished from character education by its emphasis on developing the knowledge, understandings, and intellectual and participatory skills necessary for competent and responsible citizenship in our constitutional democracy. Civic education focuses primarily upon those aspects of character that provide a basis for the citizen's role in self-government. Thus, civic education emphasizes understanding of and an appreciation for those values and principles essential to democratic life. Civic education emphasizes the development of dispositions that:

    - lead citizens to be independent members of society such as self-discipline—adhering voluntarily to self-imposed standards of behavior rather than requiring the imposition of external controls.

    - foster respect for individual worth and human dignity, such as respect for the rights of others to hold and advocate differing ideas and to join associations to advance their views; concern for the well-being of others, especially for the less fortunate.

    - incline the citizen to public affairs, such as attentiveness to public affairs, civic-mindedness, and patriotism.

    - facilitate thoughtful and effective participation in public affairs, such as civility, respect for law, honesty, courage, persistence, civic mindedness, critical mindedness, and a willingness to negotiate and compromise.

  - While schools must play a role in the overall development of the character of students, the primary responsibility for the cultivation of ethical behavior and the development of private character, including moral character, remains with families, religious institutions, work settings, and the other parts of civil society.

- **How can civic education strengthen and complement the development of character?** Effective civic education programs provide students with opportunities for the development of desirable traits of public and private character.

  - Certain learning activities can promote character traits needed to participate effectively and responsibly in civic life. For example:

    - Civility, courage, self-discipline, persistence, concern for the common good, respect for others, and other traits relevant to citizenship can be promoted through student

government and cooperative learning in such activities as class meetings, student councils, simulated public hearings and mock trials.

- Self-discipline, respect for others, civility, punctuality, personal responsibility, and other character traits can be fostered in school and service learning projects, such as tutoring younger students, caring for the school environment, and participating in voter registration drives.

- Classroom discussions of common problems can foster a recognition of shared values and a sense of community.

- Character traits (e.g., courage, temperance, empathy, civility, moral integrity) and related civic/institutional values (e.g., equality of opportunity, pluralism, common good) may be enhanced by an examination of their interdependence.

- Tolerance, respect, self-discipline, and empathy may be engendered through an understanding of and experience with voluntarism in American life.

## IV. WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS IN CIVIC EDUCATION?

Effective civic education requires a solid grounding in knowledge and understanding of the philosophical, historical, political, social, and economic foundations of constitutional democracy. To foster good civic character, civic education also must provide opportunities for students to apply what they learn and to develop skills integral to responsible and effective citizenship.

- **Characteristics of successful civic education programs**. Successful civic education programs are those which:
  - foster a reasoned commitment to the fundamental values and principles that bind Americans together as a people and provide a common ground for mutual cooperation and the peaceful management of conflict.
  - provide opportunities for students to evaluate, take, and defend positions on issues that involve ethical considerations, that is, issues concerning good and bad, right and wrong.
  - provide opportunities for students to evaluate, take and defend positions on issues that involve conflicts among values and principles in social and political life, such as conflicts between liberty and equality, liberty and authority, and individual rights and the common good.
  - promote informed, critical discussion of public issues, and respect for knowledge.
  - encourage students to participate in the civic life of their school, community, state, and nation.
  - encourage schools to work with civic organizations, to bring community leaders into the classroom to discuss issues with students, and to provide opportunities for students to observe and/or participate in civic organizations.
  - provide problem solving and decision making opportunities
  - teach students how to monitor and influence the public policy-making process at the local, state, and national levels and provide opportunities for students to do so.
  - provide opportunities for students to observe and interact with adults who model the traits of public and private character which contribute the individual's sense of dignity and worth and to the healthy functioning of constitutional democracy.

V. **HOW CAN CIVIC EDUCATION BE REVITALIZED?** The time appears ripe for the revitalization of civic education. Such a renewal might be sparked through a national initiative led by a coalition of educators, scholars, community leaders, and elected public officials.

- **A nationwide initiative for the revitalization of civic education**. A nationwide initiative in civic education could focus on the importance of a civic education for every child in America which provides a grounding in the rights and responsibilities of members of a constitutional democracy. Such an initiative would increase civic literacy, foster civility among citizens, promote understanding and appreciation of democratic institutions and processes, and enhance a sense of political efficacy.

  The groundwork for the renewal of civic education has already been laid by more than two decades of commission reports, books, and articles by educators, scholars and journalists. In 1987 the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution occasioned an outpouring of interest in the substance of civic education. In 1991, *CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education* was published; and in 1994, *National Standards for Civics and Government* were completed. These Standards continue to receive national and international acclaim.

  - A nationwide initiative could promote increased student understanding, interest, and participation in local, state, and national government, as well as in the civic associations, processes, and purposes of civil society. The principal aims of this initiative would be to:

    - deepen understanding of the historical, philosophical, political, social, and economic foundations of American constitutional democracy.

    - promote understanding of how a constitutional government operates and an appreciation of the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

    - promote informed and responsible participation in civic life.

    - foster the civic dispositions or traits of public and private character conducive to the preservation and enhancement of American constitutional democracy.

    - foster a reasoned commitment to the fundamental values and principles as expressed in core documents, such as the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, that bind us together as a nation and provide a common ground for working together.

    - promote understanding of the essential role that the institutions and values of civil society have historically played and continue today to play as foundations of American constitutional democracy. Such understanding includes the idea that the autonomous character of civil society protects society from the abuse of power by government and is therefore a chief support for constitutional government.

- **Means of implementing a nationwide initiative in civic education include:**

  - **Strengthening the formal curriculum.** State legislatures, boards of education, schools and parent groups should reexamine the formal curricula and assessment practices to determine the adequacy and effectiveness of their civic education programs.

  - **Strengthening the "informal curriculum."** Schools should thoroughly examine the "informal curriculum," or the governance of the school community and relationships among those within it, and reform it in ways consonant with the values and principles of American constitutional democracy.

  - **Expanding and enhancing teacher training.** Both the pre-service and the in-service training of teachers need to be expanded and improved so that teachers are more knowledgeable about the substance or subject matter of civics and government and are more conversant with the most effective methods in the field for teaching/learning.

  - **Enlisting public support.** The importance of civic education should be communicated to the general public through televised public forums, print media, and public service television announcements. Parents, civic leaders, and the media are important influences and have significant contributions to make to civic education.

- **Benefits of a nationwide initiative.** Revitalized civic education can provide significant benefits for all Americans. A nationwide initiative can:

  - increase understanding of the importance and relevance of politics and government and of civil society to the daily lives of all Americans, e.g., their safety and security, education, employment, health, recreation, and overall quality of life.

  - promote the development of civic character by fostering recognition of public and private responsibilities and encouraging adherence to the values and principles of American constitutional democracy.

  - elevate the sense of civic efficacy, the impact citizens can have on policies at all levels of government and on the character and purposes of the associations and endeavors of civil society.

  - build upon the natural idealism, energy, and hopes of American youth to revitalize civic life.

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